

# Balloons to fill Madison Winter Fest sky

By Allen Munn  
Of The State Journal

Nearly two centuries ago, a group of perplexed French farmers armed with pitchforks attacked a bizarre air monster that had landed in a nearby field, and in minutes, reduced it to a limp lump of lifeless linen.

Since, pilots of those bizarre air monsters have traditionally carried with them a bottle of champagne to convince distraught farmers and landowners that a hot air balloon is really a rather friendly animal.

## Other events

Beginning next Thursday, farmers and landowners throughout Dane County can look to the skies in anticipation of a swallow of naturally-chilled French champagne, as more than 80 hot air balloons participate in Madison's first Winter Spirit Festival.

The Spirit of Ballooning Fiesta will highlight the 10-day shivering shindig that begins this weekend with a snowmobile marathon, recreational vehicle show, and an antique snowmobile rally. Other events include skydiving, ice boating and clown exhibitions, ice sculpturing and a freeze-er-oo jog

*Balloons + Ballooning*

through the Arboretum.

More than 2,400 unpaid volunteers are making final preparations for the festival, hoping the first-time event will someday rival St. Paul's famous winter celebration in Minnesota and serve as an annual boost to the community ego of Wisconsin's All American City.

The four-day balloon meet that begins Thursday will be largest winter ballooning event in the world, and the world's third largest ballooning event ever.

Not unlike auto races, golf tournaments and ice fisherees, Madison's fiesta will bring together dozens of balloon buffs who are convinced their's is the greatest sport on, or above, the earth.

Included in the roster of pilots pre-registered for the event are a nine-member family from Rockford, Ill.; a husband and wife flying team from Southfield, Mich.; and a pair of Wisconsin pilots who recently guided their 70,000 cubic-inch archer across the Grand Canyon.

Chuck Thomas, a Rockford attorney, will bring his wife and seven children to Madison next week to assist a "crew" with his various flights.

The children — five girls and two boys, whose ages range from 6 to 18 — have traveled with their piloting parents to previous balloon rallies in Iowa, New Mexico, Indi-

ana, Illinois, as well as an event sponsored each autumn in Wisconsin Dells.

With all those kids, Thomas says it's a "good deal" for them that sponsors of the Madison fiesta have offered free room and board to visiting pilots and their families at the Concourse Hotel.

## Popularity grows

What isn't such a good deal, Thomas added in a telephone interview, is that his maturing children have begun bringing boyfriends and girlfriends along on many of the balloon outings.

"I see it as a growing problem in the next few years," he chuckled. "We used to be a nine-person family, and now we're up to 10."

Avid television viewers may recognize a red, yellow and orange balloon flying over Madison next week as the one seen in advertisements broadcast nationwide for Zenith color television sets.

Pilots of the Zenith balloon are Jeane and Blake Thomson, Southfield, Mich., one of the piloting couples among the 1,800 licensed balloon pilots in the United States.

Mrs. Thomson's claim that ballooning is "a sleeping giant just coming awake" is illustrated in the growth of the sport's popularity since 1970, when there were only 50 licensed balloon pilots in the country.

Like the Thomases of Rockford, Jeane, Blake and their two children make ballooning a family affair, especially during the cold Michigan winters.

## Competition scheduled

"Quiet," is the word Mrs. Thomson uses to describe winter ballooning.

"The countryside seems quieter. Perhaps because the snow deadens the sounds," she said. "The trees are bare, so you can see more animals. And the noise of the balloon carries better, so more people come out to see what's going on."

Seeing what's going on shouldn't be a problem for Madison residents or their out-of-town guests next week, because balloons will be launched from sites (usually frozen lake surfaces) scattered all around town.

Thursday afternoon, 15 balloons will leave the surface of Lake Mendota near James Madison Park in a Hare and Hound competition.

The lead balloon, or hare, will



What a sight it will be — a sky filled with hot air balloons, all as colorful as this one in the Spirit of Ballooning Fiesta beginning

tion at 3 p.m. Thursday at James Madison Park on Lake Mendota. Ballooning will continue Friday and Saturday at Wingra,